TL1430-1

CANADA-ASIA working group
comité de travail CANADA-ASIE

11 Madison Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5R 2S2
Tel: (416) 921-5626; Telex: 065-24128

Submission to the

UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON DECOLONIZATION
New York, 12 August 1988

+ + +

THE RIGHT TO SELF-DETERMINATION

OF EAST TIMOR

Mr. Chairman, I appreciate the opportunity to address the Special Committee on Decolonization on the question of East Timor. My name is Elaine Brière, and I am here to represent the Canada-Asia Working Group, a coalition of the Canadian churches with long historic links with Christian churches in Asia. I am here to speak against the continued occupation of East Timor by Indonesia and to urge the Special Committee to pursue a course of action that will allow the people of East Timor to freely determine their own future.

I am a photo-journalist with a special interest in documenting the life of small, village based societies. I have had the privilege of living in villages in several parts of Asia. I spent some time in East Timor photographing the village life before the Indonesian invasion of December 1975. I fully intended to return, but have not been able to do so. I am deeply concerned about the welfare and whereabouts of the villagers with whom I stayed in Baucau, Los Pallos and other areas. I feel indebted to the Timorese and people living in small societies like those in East Timor for sharing with me not only their food and their homes but also their social and spiritual values.

The village life that 80% of the East Timorese pursued when I was there was an integrated, self-sufficient unit. There was pride and dignity in tilling the land of one's ancestors. There was a deep attachment to family and kin, and to the mountains, rivers, streams and other aspects of the natural environment. There was continuity with the past and hopes for the future.

In April of 1974, the month of the fall of the Salazar régime in Portugal, East Timor was poised on the brink of a new and promising era. For the first time after 400 years of colonial rule, open political activity was possible. With a long history of self-government prior to the colonial period, the East Timorese quickly organized themselves into mass-based political parties. Neither of the two major political groupings, FRETILIN and the UDT, even considered integration with Indonesia. FRETILIN, which emerged as the most popular of the parties, was populist, nationalist and dedicated to improving the lives of the ordinary Timorese. The

prospect of a progressive, democratic government on its borders did not please Indonesia's military rulers. Low-intensity warfare, aerial bombing and border incursions on East Timorese territory began, culminating in a full-scale invasion by land, sea and air on 7 December 1975.

It is now well documented by human rights groups around the world that a massive slaughter of defenseless people characterized this invasion and subsequent military operations to gain control of the rural areas. Indeed, since 1975, East Timor has been the scene of one of the world's most brutal and unprovoked wars, made all the more horrific by the fact that it is a war waged against a small, largely unarmed, civilian population. That this is still continuing, that Indonesia has succeeded in sealing off East Timor for over twelve years from outside, independent observers, must be a source of great concern for all those who truly care about human rights and the self-determination of peoples.

Why is it that Indonesia has escaped international condemnation for its invasion and occupation of East Timor? Why are the rights of the East Timorese people to live and sustain their unique culture and languages in their own small corner of the world nor respected? It is easy these days to destroy a people, especially a people like the East Timorese who live directly off the land. There is no place else for them to go. It is perhaps no wonder that many East Timorese have chosen to take up arms rather than succumb to the Indonesian occupation. And there are many countries, including my own, that are willing to sell bombs and helicopters and ammunition to Indonesia that may in turn be used in its war against the East Timorese people. But where is the honour in this? Where is the humanity in the bombing of defenseless rural hamlets and the equipping of search and destroy missions into the East Timorese countryside? Why is it that rich and powerful governments like Canada and the United States debase themselves by colluding in the destruction of the East Timorese people? This is a fundamental ethical question that the leaders of the Western democracies must ask themselves.

While it is true that the resistance led by FRETILIN has managed to wage a successful guerilla war for the past 12 years, there is another kind of war going on in East Timor that is much more difficult for the East Timorese people to survive. Indonesia, with the help of its Western allies and the International Financial Institutions, is changing the face of East Timor through a program of strategic development. The International Working Group for Indigenous Affairs in Denmark has described this so-called development as a subtle type of warfare. Land is being transferred from the Timorese people to Indonesian settlers, and cash cropping is being emphasized to the detriment of traditional Timorese self-sustaining agriculture. Bahasa Indonesia is being taught in the schools and the native languages and traditions of the East Timorese people are continually suppressed.

As a consequence of a decade of military occupation and the program of Indonesianization, Dili and Baucau, the two largest urban centers in East Timor, are becoming Indonesian towns. The continual resettlement of the rural population and restricted access to the good land has caused famines and outbreaks of disease, about which the Indonesian authorities have done little. One prominent East Timorese put it this way:

> In the heart of the people there will always be resistance [to the Indonesian occupation]. That's why I think the Indonesians are happy to see famine. The Timorese people will always be a problem, so they figure: just eliminate the problem.

This statement is corroborated by the actions of Indonesian National Family Planning in East Timor. In a country that has suffered a severe population loss during the past decade, Indonesian National Family Planning operates some 250 birth control clinics and employs widespread use of the contraceptive drug Depo-Provera, banned in many countries because of its dangerous side effects. This program has been aptly described by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops as having "the character of genocide."

The East Timorese have been marginalized in guarded villages and are unable to communicate with the outside world. Infrastructure is being built to facilitate the movement of troops and the creation of new Indonesian settlements. The government of Indonesia intensifies its birth control program, thereby diminishing the East Timorese population. At the same time, Javanese and Balinese transmigrant families are being flown in from outside. And this, nowadays, is called "development". In fact, it is but a thin disguise for the extinction of a people.

I am ashamed that my country, Canada, has been a willing accomplice in the ongoing tragedy in East Timor. I am ashamed that Canada sells military equipment to Indonesia, gives money for so-called development projects in East Timor, and lends legitimacy to the Indonesian occupation through its diplomatic silence. I am not proud that six members of the Canadian parliament visited East Timor last November, effectively endorsing the Indonesian occupation without any genuine effort to ascertain the reality of the occupation for the East Timorese people. I am outraged that the profits Canadian companies make in Indonesia seem to be more important than the lives of the East Timorese people or adherence to international laws of which Canada is a signator.

But still there is hope. A hope that comes from the struggle of the East Timorese people themselves, and the considerable body of international support that has galvanized around this struggle. The invasion and illegal occupation of East Timor have never been

justified with any credibility by Indonesia. East Timor stands as a symbol of the violation of fundamental human rights and the denial of a people's legitimate rights to self determination.

It is worth remembering that the General Assembly and other courts of the United Nations have consistently and repeatedly called for the withdrawal of Indonesia's armed forces and affirmed the rights to self-determination for the people of East Timor. Last year, East Timor was reinstated on the list of countries to be examined by the U.N. Commission on Human Rights. While it is regrettable that the talks between the Secretary-General and parties concerned have not yet included representatives of the East Timorese people, there is still much that the United Nations can do for East Timor. This year is the 40th anniversary of the signing of the U.N. Declaration on Human Rights. This could be celebrated in no more meaningful way than the release of the people of East Timor from the nightmare of Indonesian military occupation. This would be a significant step in creating a more human world, a more just world, and a world that will continue to include in the human family the unique and diverse peoples of East Timor.

We urge the Special Committee to:

1. Urge the Indonesian government to fulfill its promises to allow independent observers access to East Timor;

2. Call upon the Indonesian authorities to give free and independent access to international relief and human rights agencies to work in East Timor, particularly the International Committee of the Red Cross and Amnesty International;

3. Encourage the Secretary-General to include representatives of the East Timorese people, including FRETILIN, in talks held under his auspices, in accordance with General Assembly resolution 37/30;

4. Call for a withdrawal of Indonesian occupation forces from East Timor and demonstrate support for the right of the people of East Timor to a free and fair act of self-determination, as affirmed by repeated U.N. resolutions.

+ + +